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A World with Reality Lost
Jewish Survivors of the Holocaust in Switzerland

Introduction

Switzerland is the home to many survivors of the Holocaust. This publication describes detailed conversations with some of them. They tell us of their lives and also of their relationship to their new home. For me, declares Joseph H., it is as if I am residing in a Five Star hotel. Switzerland offers for many, regardless of their economic background, something luxurious. This is so, despite the fact that it can never replace the extinction of the past Jewish world. For the present survivors, Switzerland is no longer the abysmal grand hotel she represented for many refugees during the Nazi period. They are not in danger of being deported. Nevertheless, because of present day public debates over Switzerland s past economic and political connections to Nazism, many fears of anti-Semitism have resurfaced. Many survivors still feel alone, and unable to share their terrible past experiences.

All who were interviewed suffered persecution, flight, deportation, ghettos, concentration and extermination camps. Edward Kornfeld s report about Camp Kaufbeuren outside of Dachau in the Bavarian forest is shocking: Even Hell must be better. I saw people lying on straw, crying, yelling, hallucinating, water, water one man yelled grabbing my leg. Water, water, they were all ill, feverish. Their eyes had a terrible expression. I do not know how many there were. I asked one of them about a friend, but they knew nothing. I did not recognize him anywhere. I was not even able to look for him. I went to fetch water as one after another begged for some. It was terrible. It is impossible to describe, impossible to imagine. Humans lying on the floor, some dead, some alive, yelling and begging for water. Those who somehow survived such camps can never, ever forget those experiences. Today when they describe it, they relive their terrible circumstances. It was a world with reality lost. Joseph H. says about his stay in Sachsenhausen. Even when the prisoners left the camps, the camps never left them. This along with the loss of murdered parents, siblings, children, friends and school colleagues, many survivors became deeply rooted in their consciousness. This is also true for survivors who somehow escaped the death camps, but survived in exile or were hidden during the war while their next of kin and their former social structure was being annihilated.

Fischle Rabinowicz presently lives in the center of Locarno. He is an artist using his work to visualize the suffering, expulsion, and the destruction of his people. The entire Jewish population of the Polish city of Sosnowicz where he grew up was murdered in cold blood. Rabinowicz is a descendent of the famous Chassidic Rabbi, Solomon Rabinowitz who founded a Chassidic Dynasty - a movement called the Radomsker Chassidim. Fischl Rabinowitz s art portrays many cabalistic symbols of this movement. But today who can appreciate the mysteries of this art? They represent a culture of millions of humans who are no longer with us. The paintings, understood by practically nobody, are with us in testimony of a tragedy, of a richness lost. Many survivors suffer a deep loneliness and emptiness as a result of the destruction of their world by National Socialism.

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Memories of unbelievable suffering in camps, often resurface in survivor s present life. Many have remained alone with their memories. They have given up trying to be understood. They wish not to burden those around them with their past experiences, even their own children. Yes, as Judith Meyer-Gluck in our conversation said, We wanted our children to be joyous, happy, feel safe and secure. For other survivors, it became a mission to keep memories of the Holocaust alive, this despite the bitter fact that sometimes the retelling of their experiences were met with skepticism or questioned. Many of those we interviewed have therefore shown us documents, photographs, and letters to prove that what they told us was the truth. Others, who did not have any proof of their childhood experiences, only had a receipt of their stay in a Displace Center after the war. And some had only letters from found families in the U.S. Noach Trajstar has only the tattoo number on his arm from Auschwitz. He told us about his childhood in his birthplace Kielic, a Polish City with a large Jewish population, from which he is the only survivor. Today he lives in Zurich in a small apartment in a high rise building. When he meets a neighbor he is friendly when he greets them, but nobody is aware of his past.

Life today for survivors is not only influenced by experiences and memories, it is also marked by their new surroundings; be it Israel, the U.S., Germany, or Switzerland. In the latter they found a Jewish community, whose members have not known persecution- and with whom newcomers have not always had close relationships. It has not always been easy to communicate, with Jews who have been in Switzerland for many generations. In the Swiss population at large, for many years, no interest in the Holocaust Survivors. The possibility for survivors to become integrated in a new homeland was of course influenced by the relationship Switzerland had with Germany. After the war there were also bitter debates about formerly occupied territories and about their collaborations with the Nazis. In Switzerland controversies dealt not only with moral and political questions, but with the specific act of handing over refugees to the Germans. Therefore, as long as many Swiss feel an uncritical solidarity with past policy of the military regarding the protection of its borders, or the policy of *Das Boot istVoll*, a full and open discussion about Nazism should not be expected. Only when past wrongs are admitted can a meaningful discussion take place and, the physical and psychological sufferings of survivors be recognized. Switzerland s controversial role during the Nazi period as well as for other countries is a painful memory. Many myths and lies would have to be discarded. This process would no doubt result in a negative and defensive reaction on the part of some, but nevertheless could bring forth the possibility of a new reality, and a more open society. Such a society could then celebrate some of its freedom-loving courageous heroes, like the Swiss journalist Peter Surava, who was persecuted and criticized for his truthful reporting. Or, Captain Paul Gruninger, who because of his courageous actions during the war when he saved the lives of refugees, was punished by the Swiss authorities.

During the war ideas of reparations were expressed regarding all of the damage and destruction, especially to the former Soviet Union and to people living in former Palestine. First, it was a question of demands of the Allies vs. the Axis nations ideas, which were later channeled towards a return of stolen property, and payments to survivors for their suffering. In the negotiations which followed the war, and in the nature of the German language, *Wieder-Gutmachung*, (literally translated means to make amends for past deeds) never quite correlated with reality as no compensation can bring

the dead back to life. Also, no financial compensation can recall the many that were sent back at the border to certain death.

As a matter of fact, the turning back of refugees at the Swiss Border during war years has of late become a topic of debate. It has been accepted that reparations, although just symbolic, are important not only for survivors, but also for Swiss society as a whole. Only when past historic injustice is publicly stated and condemned is a society ready for financial and legal consequences. Only then are survivors accepted as such. Reparations are, after all, the only means by which members of a society can repay historic injustice, that the present generation had no part in.

Neighboring states overrun by Germany were also indirectly guilty of following the occupier s anti-Semitic laws, in their expropriation, dispersion, and persecution of European Jewry. This reality has only lately become public. Before, only the resistance to Nazism was talked about. During the first years after Hitler took power many went into exile to Switzerland, Jews and non-Jews alike. Among them were many artists and intellectuals. In this first group those without sufficient finances were excluded and had to remain behind.

After the war many European countries, including France, Holland, and Switzerland, made a point of explaining the danger that befell their own country in regards to German expansion and aggression. Only in recent years has the issue of native anti-Semitism and collaboration that existed in different countries enter public debate. Only recently have countries admitted to have profited from collaborating with the Germans. For Switzerland the following is central to the debate: 1) her attitude regarding refugees, 2) the acceptance of stolen gold by the Swiss National Bank, 3) the commerce of stolen art, 4) the employment of slave labor by Swiss companies in Germany, 5) the influence of the National Socialist Ideology on the Swiss political and cultural elite, and finally, and 6) the handling of wealth by Swiss banks of victims that did not survive the war. It is in relation to those revelations that in 1996 many past Swiss policies became grounds for open debate. Anti-Semitic policies of the authorities concerning Jewish refugees were previously examined in a book, *Das Bootist Voll* by Alfred Hasler. But, when the book was published, the public did not seem as interested in the issue as it is today. This indicates how much solidarity and acceptance exists presently, but it also demonstrates how much denial and indifference has occurred. Current events and the social atmosphere of the times, of course, always influence oral history. It is also influenced by the political and emotional convictions of the witness and by later revelation and hindsight about the Holocaust. For the persecuted the systematic destruction of their people was incomprehensible. Events became more threatening by the day in new and unexpected ways. Decisions had to be made daily in an uncertain future. Even today, the scope of the Jewish Genocide is difficult to grasp. How was it possible to murder between 5.3 and 6 million Jewish people? We know little about what Jews suffered in various occupied territories. Only the testimony by some of the survivors gives us some insight today. Of course after 60 years some historic inaccuracies occur. We know that the first murders took place in January 1933 right after Hitler became chancellor. Sporadic criminal transgressions escalated in ever more repressive policies that developed into public physical assault, which then became de facto regulation in which Jews became second class citizens. Human rights and civil liberties were ridiculed. In most German cities book-burning events took place. Jewish businesses were taken

over by Germans. Daily humiliations were provoked to make Jews leave the country, in which they and their families had lived for centuries, for example in the Rheinland where some Jews have lived since the Roman Empire. Many were so strongly connected to Germany, that for a long time they just could not get themselves to leave. Anti-Semitism spread all over Europe making it difficult, and sometimes impossible, to find a new homeland. Switzerland, with her anti-Jewish policy, was no exception at the time. France, Great Britain, and the United States were also not ready to accept refugees, or at least only very few. Between 1933 and 1937 about 130,000 Jews fled Germany. Switzerland made it difficult for them to enter since there was already a decree which denied those who were persecuted because of race political refugee status.

When Germany marched into Austria in 1938 the situation became more critical. President Franklin D. Roosevelt called for a conference in Evian, Switzerland from July 6 to July 14 to discuss the problem. Delegates from 32 counties could not agree to accept more Jewish refugees. Also in 1938 Switzerland introduced the requirement, under the influence of Germany, for Jews with a passport from Austria, to have the letter J stamped in it. It made it practically impossible for any Jewish person to enter the country. Western democracies made it clear that they were not willing to do anything for persecuted Jews. In November 1938 the situation became even more critical, when Kristallnacht took place, in which the windows of Jewish businesses were systematically broken. In the fall of 1939 the invasion of Poland signaled the eruption of WWII. Conditions deteriorated further. In the summer of 1941 German soldiers executed and shot great numbers of Jews in occupied Eastern Europe. Many of the people interviewed in this book came from those regions. Different than in Germany, anti-Semitism occurred here immediately, almost overnight and without mercy. There was no possibility of escape. Jews in all territories occupied by Germany were robbed, put into ghettos, concentration and death camps, and finally murdered. In Auschwitz, Treblinka, Chelmo and other death camps between the end of 1941 until November 1944 almost three million Jews were asphyxiated with poison gas.

The murder of an entire people leaves many vestiges. In banks, accounts remain open: there is artwork, insurance policies, copyrights, securities, vehicles, clothing, toys, photos, and much, much more. Not only the German army and the SS, but also very average employees in banks, insurance companies, real estate people, art dealers, auctioneers, tenants, teachers, and doctors came into contact with much of what the victims of the Holocaust had left.

Out of this situation many questions have arisen, questions pertaining to the guilt not only of the murderers, but also of those who knew. In the last years inquiries took place about those who knew but kept quiet, about supporters, and those who simply profited. Those are the questions, which in Switzerland, remain on the front pages. Historical inquiries took place by an independent expert commission on WW II. It is from this inquiry that we know that at least 30 thousand Jews were sent back from the Swiss border to certain death.

Already, in March of 1933 in Switzerland, there were concerns regarding the entry of Israelites . Two months after Hitler came to power the Swiss Parliament, the Justice Department, and the Police Department, decided that Jewish refugees should only receive temporary residence permits and not be considered permanent residents. From 1939 those entering illegally were to be sent back. This policy was reiterated in April

1941. In August 1942 when the destruction of the Jews became widespread and known to the Swiss, the authorities repeated this order again but then retracted after public outcry and pressure. Some were lucky enough to reach Switzerland during this time. On September 26th the order was again reinstated to send refugees back. Refugees who were lucky and reached Switzerland in this interval were given refuge. For Theodora D. this notion was unbelievable. She, her mother and sister were saved, when they escaped during September of 1942 from France.

Reine Seidlitz was not so lucky. Although she had become a Swiss citizen while still a child, her parents were Stateless, they had lived many years in Switzerland, but happened to be in France when the war broke out. She tried everything to bring them back legally or illegally but did not succeed. In 1944 they lived in a small town near the border from which they were deported to Auschwitz and murdered.

At the end of the war 115,000 refugees were in Switzerland. Only a few were there because of their race . Switzerland gave temporary asylum during the war to about 300,000 people who had many reasons to flee. There were political refugees, prisoners, and others, 1809 who had been persecuted for having Jewish ancestry. 19,495 Jewish people were officially registered. Switzerland also gave refuge to many children who had entered legally or through organizational connections and lived in foster homes or in special children s institutions.

In 1945 most Jews who had survived were encouraged to leave the country. Today 1,600 remain. Some survivors of the camps who were helped by the Red Cross and Jewish institutions increased this number. Many of them had tuberculosis and slowly regained their health in sanatoriums in Davos. Most remained only temporarily in Switzerland. For a small number, Switzerland became their home, after many year, and they acquired citizenship.

This book contains the life story of 11 Holocaust survivors. In interviews we had with them, they describe their childhood, their experiences during the Shoah (Holocaust) and what happened afterwards. Their testimony tells us how they were affected by their experiences. In this publication we have, for the first time in book form, a collection of personal eyewitness reports of Jewish survivors in Switzerland. For this book to have been published in 1999 is no coincidence. It happened in a time where a public debate has arisen. It is a discussion, not only of facts, but also an examination of a large segment of the Swiss population s perception of justice, which in turn will hopefully influence, in a positive way, our future behavior. It is therefore very crucial to listen to the voices of the persecuted. It is also noteworthy that opinions of those interviewed regarding life in Switzerland are varied. They range from emotional isolation and criticism, to feelings of gratitude towards their new homeland. Without doubt the time and circumstances of their entry played a large part in this.

Noach Trajster went back to Poland after the war, where he still witnessed anti-Semitism. He was happy to have able to immigrate to Switzerland. Roland Kirislovsky, after being liberated from a German concentration camp, was arrested by the Soviet Military, and accused of being an American spy. He was first held in a former Nazi camp, Sachsenhausen, and later kept prisoner for 10 years in Soviet camps. He came to Switzerland afterwards as his only option. The Swiss Red Cross on the other hand brought Rywen T. directly from liberated Buchenwald to Switzerland. Today many of the

survivors feel at home in Switzerland, as their children and grandchildren have grown up here.

Those interviewed were born in Berlin, Bratislava, Antwerp, or Paris, in Romania, Poland, and Hungary. They grew up in very religious or assimilated families and therefore had different cultural as well as linguistic backgrounds. Our conversations took place in German, or as some preferred, in Swiss dialect. For all it was a language they did not grow up with. They often expressed themselves in foreign idioms; an added complexity also arose because some that were interviewed lived in the Italian or French speaking part of Switzerland whose language they now use in daily life. Those interviewed had different responses to the same questions. Some concentrated on telling the historical facts, the events they remembered; for others it was a very personal and emotional recollection.

Rywen T. feels compelled to remember and never forget those that have been murdered. He feels his life after 1945 is of little importance. Also to be considered among those interviewed is the difference in their age at the time of the Holocaust. Children view events differently as for them, understandably, it was the separation from their parents which was central when retelling their memories. Golda L. was only seven years old when she came to Switzerland in 1943. She told us of her pain and longing for her parents, how she had nobody to tell of her suffering. Even under the most extreme conditions in the camps, children remember different events. Judith Meyer-Gluck remembers her excitement when she was 9 years old and performed in a play in Theresianstad; this, next to the suffering of hunger, illness, death, and the terrible cold. We heard from Otto Klein, who with his twin brother, was twelve years old when they arrived in Auschwitz. He told us how he was used for medical experiments yet, also remembers how he watched, with much interest, soccer games between prison guards and inmates while at the same time new arrivals were being chased up the ramps into the gas chambers. We made a deliberate effort to interview people with different origins, different experiences, and who also differ presently in their social and professional lives. Even demographically we saw the difference. For instance, for Theodora D. who lives in a Swiss suburb, her Jewish origin remains practically hidden.

We met with those interviewed in the summer and the fall of 1997. Our conversations lasted between five and eight hours and, therefore, met several times. They took place in their homes, or sometimes in the workplace. We asked them to tell us their whole life stories.

Some who were interviewed had planned ahead of time what they would report to us. For others who had never mentioned their experiences it was necessary to ask more questions; this was not always easy, as many had repressed their past for a long time, especially when very intimate events were described. A special relationship developed between the interviewer and the survivor. Special care had to be taken to retain the dignity of the victims, to remain respectful and serious about their testimony of WW II. Understandably many witnesses were emotionally overtaken when telling us their experiences, they cried, or had to leave the room temporarily. We taped our conversations, and transcribed them afterwards. We did edit and shorten them to make them more accessible to the reader. In doing so, we did our best to retain the style and content. Considering that more than 50 years have elapsed, it is to be expected that some minor inaccuracies were told. Before the book was printed we showed, those who were

interviewed, the manuscript for inspection. Some of the people interviewed did not want their full name printed in this publication, as they felt the need to hide their Jewish origins for personal or professional reasons.

Almost all of those interviewed, despite their readiness to participate in this project expressed skepticism and fear and had questions about whether the book would be of interest to present day readers. Will it bring enlightenment or will it reinforce some of the old prejudices against Jews? They questioned whether their own personal experiences were worth retelling considering the magnitude of annihilation. While we conducted the interviews, pessimism slowly diminished. For others the book represented a possibility to keep alive the memory of the Holocaust, to give murdered family and friends a sort of memorial. To be interviewed and then again be faced with the transcription from the oral to the written testimony was a very emotional challenge. We would like to express our appreciation for their cooperation. We also thank the many that we interviewed whose report we were not able to publish in this book. To report about traumatic events requires an effort and readiness to go back to a very painful past. Some of the people were very nervous before the interviews, others had recurring nightmares afterwards. When we had to select the conversations to be published, Gabor Hirsch assisted us; he is the head of the Center of Holocaust Survivors. We owe him many thanks. Our gratefulness also goes to the Foundation of Irene Bollag-Herzheimer (Basel) and the foundation of Rene and Suzanna Braginsky (Zurich). Our gratefulness also goes to the Swiss-Jewish Community Center who gave us financial help with the cost of the interviews. Recognition is extended to students and teaching assistants from the History Dept. of the Ruhr University Bochum who helped us with the transcriptions, Thomas Terbeck, Michael Frey- M. P. (Zurich), and V. S. (Berlin). In addition we would like to thank Tanja Hetzer (Zurich) for her help with interviews and professional advice. We also thank Dorothy Klaus for her linguistic background in the transcription, this was a very big help.

Raphael Gross Eva Lezzi Marc R. Richter

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The only thing that remained with me, was my ability to think. Nobody was able to take that away from me.

Interview with Noach Trajster

Jan Noach Trajster was born in 1915, in Kielce, a city in southern Poland. His story is a long one; our conversation lasted over several sessions. At first he was hesitant to talk to us. He inquired extensively about out project. He wanted to know exactly why he should trust us with his life story. He was trying to foresee how readers would react. Would they not misunderstand his conversations with us? He worried that our publication might distort Jewish life in the poor environment from which he came. Our first conversation took place in his small apartment in a high rise in the Allbiesrieden section of Zurich. When he started to speak he constantly paced the floor and we had to ask very few questions. When he talked he gazed out the window, towards the mountains and beyond to Kielce, and back to Buchenwald and Auschwitz.

I was born in 1915, the third of four children. Kielce was a Polish city whose population was 50% Jewish. It was a metropolis, a big city, whose administrators oversaw the area from Krakow to Warsaw.

My parents, especially my father, were very religious. I have few memories about my childhood. When I was three years old I contracted tuberculosis, and was bedridden for a long time. My mother is the one who introduced me to Yiddish Literature. In my youth, there was no opportunity to speak Polish. At home, and later at work, only Yiddish was used. I only learned proper Polish in 1933 after I was arrested and put in prison. I felt it was important for me to speak and learn Polish so others would not think that we were talking about them. Our solidarity should remain intact while in prison.

My relationship with my mother was the closest in my whole family, perhaps because of my sickness in childhood. She had become my guardian angel. I remember when I had problems with my eyes, and had an appointment for a treatment. It was on the Sabbath and we had to take the train to Warsaw. My grandfather objected to us traveling on this day. But, mother told him, Have you not learned that health comes before the Sabbath? Whereupon grandfather answered, I have learned that God is there to help. And it is not for us to be worried. My mother defended her point, Well, did you or did you not learn that health comes first? We are going. While in Warsaw, my aunt taught me something else. She told me to always question the written word, and to ask myself when it was written and why. Reading became my passion. Because of my poor health I did not go to school much. When I was 10 years old I was enrolled in Cheder (a religious school). We had a little math, some Polish instruction, the rest of the time was devoted to memorizing the Chumesch (the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses). My general education was self-taught. When I was sixteen I went to work ten or eleven hours a day, as a delivery boy. Each time I accepted a new job, I demanded more pay. As time went on, I had raised my salary from two to ten zloties (about three dollars), which at the time was considered a large sum for a young person. Work was hard and dependent on the

weather. Before the holidays there was much to do. My vocational choices were limited to becoming a tailor, a shoemaker, a furrier, or a hat maker. Those were all Jewish occupations. The production of shoes was practically 100% in Jewish hands. Both of my brothers were coat makers, and my sister was a dressmaker. Most people lived under very bad conditions, without running water or electricity. The six of us had one room plus a kitchen. I slept with my father in bed, my sister with my mother, until we were quite big. My brothers shared a folding bed in the kitchen. Yet, we were not among the poorest, and were considered lower-middle class. Others lived in places that were much worse. In our courtyard there was a family of four living in a small room, which also served as a workshop. The father repaired rubber shoes, and used poisonous glues. Those were the living conditions at the time in Poland.

Were there no wealthy Jews in Kielce?
Yes, there were some that were well off. But rich, what does one mean by rich? There were all sorts of people. Some were water carriers, robbers, beggars, musicians who entertained, and also of course some wealthy people.

What kind of work did your father do?
My father had no profession or trade. One time he bought a barrel of herring. He emptied it into small jars, which he then sold. As far as I can remember, he never earned much, but somehow we lived from it. There were labor unions in Kielce, but the Christians and Jews were separated. The Christian unions did not like to accept Jews. In Kielce, the Zionist organizations were politically active, and they represented perspectives from right to left. In the 30s, when Fascism took hold in Germany, young people became more radical, including Jewish youth. It was then, that I became a Communist. I was 16 years old, and a member in an illegal Communist group. Our three basic principals at the time were Equality, Peace, and Freedom.

Anti-Semitism was very widespread in Poland, different than in other countries. Poland still had a big rural population, which was very much under the influence of the Catholic Church, who repeated, The Jews killed Jesus . As I said before, I was arrested in 1933. In the first two years, prison was a good learning place. The university students in prison introduced me to Kant, Hegel, and Marx. We had many discussions and since we had no writing material, everything had to me memorized. In 1935 there was an amnesty, and in 1936 I was released.

What was the reason for your arrest in 1933?
I was active in an illegal organization, we distributed leaflets, and tried to politicize the young people in the unions. The police had informants there who reported us.

Did you want to bring forth a revolution?
Yes, of course, my goal was a revolution. The Soviet Union was our model. It was a question of equality, which was a very important goal, especially for the Jewish youth.

What was your position relative to the Moscow Trials?
In the 30s, we had many discussions about the trials. The majorities of the accused were Jewish, for us it was very difficult to understand. Many debates on the subject took place.

It was incomprehensible to us. It was a big shock. And we believed that in a future Poland such a miscarriage of justice would not take place.

In 1937 I was arrested again. This time for no particular reason, except that I had been in prison in the past. At this time, authorities simply doubled your sentence, so this time they convicted me to six years in prison. We, of course, lost all of out political rights. In the beginning we were able to read all newspapers. This privilege was later withdrawn. Between 1933 and 1935 they put political prisoners together with criminal prisoners, thinking they would harass us. But just the opposite took place. They respected us. We were put in prison clothing and our heads were completely shaved. The usual one-hour per day in the fresh air was reduced to 30 minutes this time. That went on until 1939.

Did you have contact with your family?

The last time I saw my sister was in September of 1939, when she visited me. When the war started, I was in prison. Three days later the Wehrmacht stormed the prison. Among the political prisoners, were some of so called German origin (from the Baltic States). There were searched out and immediately released. The Baltic prisoners promised to do everything possible so that we also would be released. But, when the Wehrmacht officer saw the request, he replied, What, you want us to set free Jews and Communists? Out of the question. We became permanent prisoners, and prepared to be transferred. We were all assembled in the courtyard. It was then that I saw, for the first time, criminal behavior by the Nazis towards Jews. The yard where we used to walk was completely crowded with Jewish people. The Wehrmacht went around with big shears, pulling and cutting the side locks and beards of the men. Then, they herded us into small cells, and put 14 of us in a cell that was originally intended for four. After about 10 days we were transferred. We were imprisoned in cattle cars, without water or food. It was a terrible, long trip. The train stopped often to let the German military trains pass, they had priority on the rails. When we arrived in Breslau, it was a beautiful Sunday morning, and as we stood in the train station, a young Pole relieved himself in his cap. The poor fellow had no other option. A short distance away two well dressed woman, probably mother and daughter, said in a loud voice, Those Polish pigs! I translated it to the young Pole and advised him at the same time to throw the contents of his cap in their faces, which he promptly did. A big outcry followed. We were then put in a temporary camp consisting of only tents. Then again we were put on a train, without water and food. It was a transport of about two thousand people. There were very few Jews among us. It consisted mainly of Polish people who were rounded up in the streets after the German invasion, the purpose of which was to intimidate and frighten the population. After several more stops we arrived in Weimar. There, the customary treatment followed: we had to jump from the train and received beatings over the head with clubs. Only by jumping fast and making sure not to fall, was a more severe beating avoided. Then, we were marched off to Buchenwald. It was October 15, we had to line up five in a row. A marching band received us. I could not believe what was happening. A role call took place. Then the SS picked a few among us and insulted and intimidated us. They were especially cruel to the Polish Police who were overweight and still in uniform. After they were insulted as bloodsuckers, they were trampled on for a long time. They ordered everybody into barracks, except the Jews. We were sent immediately to work. Jews were always treated

differently. After all, we were the chosen people , and it was Saturday. We took showers, our hair was again cut, we received underwear, pants, shirt, everything. I remember how impressed I was, when after looking at my feet I was asked if I wore size forty. We received shoes with nails, the kind Polish soldiers wore. Then, we had our prisoner number stamped on our arm. Mine was 8914. In 1941 or 1942 it was changed to 693. (Translator s note: The number got lower because many died.) I entered a new world. When questionnaires were filled out I was asked, name? I answered Noach Trajster . No, I was told my name was now Israel Noach Trajster. Mother s name? I asked, Israel? Where upon he said, No, Sara. After a while I was asked, previously convicted? Silence followed, I had to think about my answer. They called for a translator thinking I had not understood the question. Finally I said, I did belong to the Polish Communist Party , where upon he responded, OK CPP . He put me in with other political prisoners. Here we discussed the Hitler-Stalin Non-Aggressive Pact. Some of the prisoners saw things from a German point of view and actually thought that England and France represented a bigger danger to them than Germany. I was not convinced.

We were put in small detachments in tents, with only planks to sleep on, not even straw. We were assigned the hardest work. We became stone carriers. After a short time typhus broke out among us. We were isolated from the bigger camp. Our rations were cut. People kept dying around us. In the morning when we left the tent, we had to be careful not to step on a body in the snow. In this region winters are very cold, and summers very hot. On Christmas 1939 we went to take a shower and afterwards we were given summer clothes. It was a way for us to die sooner. When I glanced at the clothes, I put them in a corner and ran quickly back into the shower without thinking and so received a second outfit. I was therefore in possession of two shirts, two undergarments, two pair of socks, etc. It was a dangerous act, but the guards at the time were not the SS, only other prisoners, who also gave beatings.

In January of 1940 as I was lying on the planks, my body exhausted, I was thinking, the time to die had come. Then I heard the shouting, Role call! When this happened at an unexpected time, it spelled danger. With much effort I managed to get up and get into formation. The head officer was selecting a group whose purpose I found out later. He passed me up, but my instinct made me join the selected in the line. He went back over those in the line, and pointing to me said, this one out. Walter Kramer, who stood next to him, asked me, How old are you? I answered, twenty. Kramer turned to the officer and said, He is still young and can still live. And the officer replied, Well, OK, what do I care . That is how I joined the selected. This was no coincidence. Kramer knew me. He was a German Communist. He was in prison for a long time before being transferred to Buchenwald. He had become a sanitary inspector, a medical orderly. In camp, Kramer had acquired so much medical knowledge, that prisoners called him Buchenwald's Doctor Without a Diploma . He always tried to help when possible. At the end of 1941 he was shot. I am of the opinion, that Dr. Eisele, who was company commander in the SS delivered him to the Gestapo. Kramer had saved my life.

After having been shaved from head to toe, we were put into barracks for the sick. Upon entering, I was overcome by a terrible odor. In the corner a big container served as a toilet for the sick. I was in terrible condition. I had diarrhea, my mouth was practically frozen, and I could hardly open it, and barely eat. It was Saturday. On Sunday I crumpled some bread and forced it into my mouth; I wanted to survive. Monday we were brought

to a big infirmary. There, everybody was submerged into a disinfecting bath, then hosed off with cold water. As I straightened up I heard someone yell, Look Jesus has been resurrected again . I was skin and bones. I weighed 34 kilos (75 pounds). We were brought to Block A, a place with beds and sheets. I was afraid to lie down, as I still had diarrhea. After a while I heard the voice of Walter Kramer, Where is the young man who looked so poorly? I answered, I m here . He ordered, On the other side . That is where children were put, who actually received chocolate every evening. Yes, chocolate, apparently taken out of packages from Holland. The following day when the head master looked at the worst cases, he glanced at me and said, Block Seven . A nurse wanted to pick me up and carry me. But, I refused, I wanted to walk. I was put into an empty room, fear of infection was the reason. The stove was lit. I received blankets, yet I was not able to sleep. I had apparently gotten used to sleeping on the planks. The nurse checked my pulse, and felt my feet, which remained ice cold. After a short time I got up and started to sweep the place clean. I was lying down, the nurse brought me an electric pillow for my legs. When lunch came around I had a hard time eating. I softened the bread in the coffee and tried to shove it in my mouth. Walter Kramer came to see me and ask me about my complaints. I answered, First diarrhea . Oh well he answered, We will take care of that . Secondly I can not eat . He then proceeded to rub my mouth with a tincture, and really the next day I was able to eat normally. A doctor was sent for, to inspect the infection. He declared that I was on the way to recovery.

Afterwards I took care of 20 inmates in a big hall. I kept the place warm. I saw to it that the stove was always lit. I brought in and served the food. I washed the dishes. Kramer looked around and said, He is the sickest and takes care of 20 people .

I remained in the barracks for the sick for 16 months where I did my best to be useful. One day Kramer asked me, Tell me, are you 100% Jewish? I answered, Yes . Something is not right, after all you do not have two left hands. Anti-Semitism was so wide-spread that it was assumed that every Jew had two left hands.

One day I ran into Dr. Wagner, the under commander, he turned to the head nurse and asked, Is he a Jew? She answered, Yes . Then he answered, We have to move him, we have to give him some ray therapy . I knew the meaning of this treatment, death by injection. But Kramer told me later to always be dressed and to avoid Dr. Wagner. But then a new doctor arrived, a Dr. Eisele. Kramer came to see me again. Dear boy, with this one I will not be able to protect you, just go out in the camp, you know where to find a piece of bread, a shirt, good luck . So I joined the others. Walter Kramer was shot shortly after this.

When was Kramer shot?

At the end of 1941, I can never forget him. In the camp I worked all kinds of jobs. One day as I was transporting some soil to a garden, my partner complained about the living conditions. Then he asked me weather I received money from home. Somehow this was possible. I said No . He proposed that I accept 30 marks from his wife, and give him half. It was OK with me, and truly, shortly after that, the money started to arrive. There was not too much for sale. We could buy salad, red beets, and honey cake, apparently made with chestnut flour. This side commerce was especially helpful to the Jews because the others were given more food. Later I received parcels with clothing, etc. The wife of

my friend was Aryan, and he had left her a lot of money. He even bribed some of the guards to make his bed for him.

During the later part of 1942 we were informed that the state had to be cleansed of all Jews. We were all to be evacuated from Buchenwald. About thirteen sick and myself could stay if we wanted to. But, I refused. I knew what was waiting for us.

I wanted to join the others and go to Auschwitz. Since I knew the process of transportation, I acquired a sharp knife and a small saw. Once in the wagon, I drew a circle, and everybody used the saw for five minutes. And so, we had at least a toilet aboard, thus avoided the terrible stink. Upon arriving in Auschwitz we were stampeded into the shower. But when I heard the command, Take along your shoes and belt , I knew that we were not going to the gas chambers afterwards. Before I turned in my cloths, I again made some trades with a Pole who was standing there. I gave him my two sweaters, two shirts, etc. Every evening he returned one piece back to me, for which I rewarded him. The second day someone approached me. Noach! I did not recognize him. Years ago he was in one of our Communist cells. He had already been in Auschwitz for a long time. He had connections in the kitchen and was able to get me some sugar the following day. I remained in the main camp for only ten days. I was then transferred to an annex in Buna-Monowitz. There we were to make ourselves useful in the Buna-Works.

One evening in the summer of 1943, a big kettle for disinfecting was brought in. I went up to the locksmith and asked to be shown how it operated. The following day when the foreman asked who could operate a disinfecting machine, I yelled, I can! Where did you learn to do it? In Buchenwald. Then I showed him how to operate the boiler as I was instructed the previous evening. He then asked me how many men I needed. I told him eight. I was able to provide an easy job for some of the inmates. Later I became a specialist in the laundry room. Then I worked in a hospital camp until the end of the war where I became an attendant, a kind of nurse. When the barracks were full the under commander, Dr. Horst Fisher came by and proceeded with the selection . When he said, to Birkenau! it meant the gas chamber. Sometimes, I made the people get dressed and hid them in the camp. Which was, after all, very large. It was risky. Sometimes they were caught. But some succeeded and were saved.

Later when this same Dr. Fisher was put on trial, I was a witness against him. He received the death penalty. I was also present at the Nuremberg Trials. When those who delivered the gas were asked whether they knew that their product was used to kill people, they claimed that they were told the gas was used to destroy vermin.

I remember distinctively how Dr. Ambross (president of the Buna-Works and IG - Farber) was sentenced to 8 years in jail for having murdered and enslaved civilians. He made a long speech in front of the tribunal in which he proclaimed that his goal had been to produce silk underwear. But, Hitler forced him to produce gas out of the same raw materials.

During the second half of January 1945, when the Russians were near Krakow, the camp was evacuated. All who were able to walk were told to bring a blanket and to get ready to march away. We debated whether to remain in the camp and hide. But we were afraid, they might decide to burn it down, which did not happen. On the way a group of us escaped from the convoy. It was not too difficult because one of us knew the surroundings very well. And, we had prepared beforehand, and because we were lucky.

After our escape had succeeded we separated. I hid with a Polish family. But the war was still raging and we waited until the German Wehrmacht would completely retreated.

Yes, I still remember an episode from this period during a bomb alert. A young woman sat next to me, and I suddenly became aware that she was flirting with me. I did not react to her, and she even opened her blouse. But at this time I was not able to mentally or physically have any kind of reaction. Several months later when I met her in the street she asked me straight out. What does a woman have to do, for you to understand that she would like to have a relationship with you?

You have survived. How do you explain it?
I had no special strategy, danger arose suddenly and unexpectedly. In order to have a chance at survival, one had to be able to think fast, be very observant, and have made previous contact with others.

Recently I saw a program on TV where former inmates of the camps stated that they survived because they believed in God. That is an insult and contempt for the millions who died in the Holocaust. I was witness, in the middle of winter, after a selection of people, who were half-naked were shoved onto a wagon to the gas chambers. One of them put a hand on his head and said, Great God, you are tempting me, but I will persevere . Yes, I know there are people who survived, and who believed that God helped them to cling to life, and to find their loved ones.

What force made you cling to life?
I clung to life because I wanted to survive Hitler. I wanted to witness the behavior of the master race, when lice and vermin would attack them, as they did me.

After we were liberated I returned to Kielce, the city of my childhood. It was a very difficult time. I was free, but unable to enjoy my freedom. Suddenly I realized I had no survival skills. Also, every street, every corner brought me back to the past. The pain of not finding any of my family was overwhelming. When I encountered two youths, I had known in the camps, on their way to Prague, I joined them.

Once in Prague, I regained my self-confidence, and became a well-paid worker. I even had a relationship, of which I often think about. I met a nice looking young woman; I was attracted to her very much. But, I was not sure how she felt. One evening, she came to my place and asked whether she could stay. She said something flattering about my hair. Without saying anything she was in my arms, and I kissed her on the mouth. She then reacted by saying, I sure had to wait a long time for this to happen! An intimate relationship developed. But, I noticed that her thoughts were far away sometimes. I looked into her eyes and seemed to detect a certain coldness. She then asked, What s wrong with you? I saw something in your eyes that does not appeal to me. Where upon she said, You with your psychology, you could kill somebody with it . Then she added, Give me two weeks to work on the problem . I remember how I struggled with myself, because despite everything, I liked her. But I broke off our relationship. I was recently in Prague and was debating whether I should pay her a visit, which of course I did not do. She was probably just fine, but I was not. The many years in prison and in the camps had had their consequences, my youth had been destroyed. She was young, wanted to dance, enjoy life, but I had become old before my time. In 1952 I returned to Poland as a cutter in a shoe factory. I worked myself up and was the editor of our trade journal until

1968. This was a time when a climate of anti-Semitism started in Poland again. Many Jews were fired, and people started to emigrate.

On March 31, 1970 I came to Switzerland with my wife and daughter. I was promptly put in the hospital, where the doctors diagnosed that nothing worked properly in my body. In Poland, in 1968 I was declared disabled. In Switzerland, in 1975 I was promoted to 100% disabled.

In Switzerland I was truly impressed by two things. First, although the country was divided into three distinct parts, each with their own language, and different religions, they lived together in harmony. Of course later I found out that there were some problems that had not appeared at first. Secondly, I was very pleasantly and favorable impressed by Switzerland s social services as directed by the AHV (like the US Social Security System). As far as I know, it is truly the best in the world.

Have you had conversations about the relationship between Switzerland and Nazi Germany?

The debate about the Holocaust is conducted, in my opinion, in a very narrow way. Everybody should think back, and remember what their religious community in their own country did to combat or protest the Holocaust. As a matter of fact, we should go back to the first years of the Hitler Regime, when the Olympics took place in Germany. It was an open international event. Was it not there that Hitler openly declared his philosophy of the super race? Later, he invaded Czechoslovakia, with the consent of France and England (afterwards they defended the invasion and said it would preserve the peace in Europe).

So today, when Switzerland is accused of prolonging the war because of her economic relationships with Germany, it is only fair to consider all of the facts in a broader context. It is true that in 1938 Switzerland sent back, from her border, many that wanted to enter. But, what other country was willing to accept Jews? Were the Americans willing to alter their restrictive immigration laws to save Jews? The answer is of course, no. The British government also failed to reach out by denying visas and thus was guilty for many ending up in camps. Of course, Switzerland had its share of pro-Nazis.

The present Holocaust debate has brought a certain revival of anti-Semitism in Switzerland. As a simple example, recently one of my neighbors said to me, referring to the claims of reparations and claims to wealth left by victims, Well, Mr. Trajster now you will be rich . I answered her, I was never rich, I have never aspired to become rich. My struggle in life was always to achieve Equality, Peace, and Freedom.

I would like to add something to the subject of Jews and gold, about which there is much discussion presently. When I think back to my childhood in Poland; I remember that it was a simple tradition to make gifts of gold, for the poor it was silver. This tradition had developed from past historic experiences, when expulsion and pogroms took place. It was said, gold and silver would always help you to survive, and then start over again. This was also the case in our family. Unfortunately, the heirloom which my mother had put aside for me, and at the time was already two hundred years old, was stolen by the Nazis. If it had not been stolen my daughter would have inherited the gold piece. This gold piece also serves as a remembrance of our forefathers. In the same spirit it was customary for Polish Jewish families to give a child the name of a relative who had passed away. Today, all of those traditions are extinct. Gone are all of those customs. At

my daughter s wedding, she received many objects made of glass; this was very strange to me because glass is very fragile and breakable. In Switzerland there were no pogroms, so the traditions we knew in Poland did not develop.

Do you often think of the past?
Yes, very much, especially since I am alone. All that has remained with me, is my ability to think. Nobody was able to take this away from me; Polish Fascists nor Hitler Germany.

In the last two or three years has your personal opinion of Switzerland changed?
No, except for the insight I acquired when this woman asked if I would be rich soon. She expressed what many are thinking. I live a secluded life. I take regular walks. When I was young, I never thought that I would become eighty years old, or that I would some day live in an apartment with water, light, and heating. I have my daughter and her family. I have no reason to complain. I am satisfied.

What are your thoughts concerning the discussions about the so-called reparations?
The culprits, the former SS for instance, still receive their pensions. But when there are questions about compensating the victims, we hear, The treasury is empty . For the criminals money is always available. For the victims they establish new rules, and time limitations. For the culprits the old rules suffice. I believe that the present debate, to create a Solidarity Foundation here in Switzerland is counter-productive. It creates a sort of taxpayer revolt. We hear, That is our money , and to be truthful, all European countries, where Jewish people lived, have profited from the persecution, have melted the gold that was stolen. Until now, nobody has spoken of the return of this wealth. If ever such a foundation is established, all European countries that had a Jewish population should carry the burden.

Have you become a Swiss citizen?
My papers are those of a stateless refugee. Perhaps, because I never contemplated that I would live this long. Also I probably would have had difficulties due to my past, my so-called criminal record. Secondly it is a question of money, something that I never had in surplus. I have therefore remained a stateless refugee, and will die as such.

My daughter has a note with the inscription that will be on my tombstone. It will contain the names of my father, my sister and her child, and the names of the others in the family that were murdered by the Nazis.

Interview by Raphael Gross and Eva Lezzi

Photo taken at the end of January or the beginning of February 1945 with those who fled while on the death march from Auschwitz. In the rear, from left Jan Noach Trajster; Ronek (surname unknown) in Auschwitz from 1942 until 1945; Leo Hauser, 1939-1942 in camp Sachsenhausen, 1942-1945 in Auschwitz; Samuel Georges Radzinski, a resistance fighter in Paris; Mieczyslaw Maneli, 1943-1945 in Auschwitz, later a professor in New York; Alfred Bessermann, resistance fighter in Paris. Front from left, Alfred Panic, resistance fighter 1943-45 leader of the group in Auschwitz; Erna Stasiak-Kostek, Polish non-Jewish resistance fighter, Warsaw 1939-1942 in Buchenwald, 1942-1945 in Auschwitz.

2

"To be completely alone - That is how I tramped around in this world"

Interview with Golda L.

I met Golda L. in her apartment, at the limit of the city of Zurich. It was not difficult to enter in a conversation with her. Mrs. L. remembers events from her early childhood without any difficulty. She was born in Berlin in 1935, In August of 1939, just before the start of the war, her parents sent her off to Paris. She lived with an aunt, until Paris was occupied by German troops, and she had to flee again. She lived hidden in the unoccupied zone in France until May 1943. She was able to enter Switzerland were she was taken in by a Protestant family

My first three and a half years of my life were spent in Berlin, were I was born in December 1935. My first memories are those of a white bed with railings from which I was able to look out. Most happenings from this early period, I acquired later in life from relatives, a cousin for instance told me that since my third birthday was just after "Kristallnacht", birthday parties were not celebrated. Many events of this period I have reconstructed with the help from friends of my parents, also, from photos which I collected from acquaintances, who had left Germany in time, for France and Los Angeles.

My clearest memories start when I left, or rather when I was sent away from Berlin.

It was August 1939, and my father accompanied me on the train until Frankfurt am Main. We sat in the train, and my mother was standing on the platform and cried. I wanted to get out of the train and be with her, but my father did not let go of me and held me back in his arms. That was how I parted from my mother. I never saw her again.

In Frankfurt I was handed over to somebody, I can not remember the person. We went on to Basel, then to Paris. After I arrived in Paris, I remember distinctly that I was sitting at the table, it was dark, I felt completely alone, and I was drinking a cup of warm chocolate. I was staying with the sister of my father, who was in charge of a nursery-school in a Paris suburb. Many years later I understood why this first experience remained so strongly with me. It was symbolic of my stay in Paris, and also of my life afterwards, which was impregnated with a terrible loneliness.

In 1941 we fled Paris, it seemed as if the whole city was on the way to somewhere. We left in the last train out of Paris in a freight-car over the river Loire, just before the Germans destroyed the bridge. I remember how I was overcome with fear, especially when the doors swung open at every curve. This trip has reappeared many times in my dreams.

My aunt, who had a peculiar sense of humor, told me later how people were looking up to us on this trip, because we had brought a chamber-pot with us. After awhile we arrived in a women's camp called "Gurs".

Could you tell us something about your family - something specific?
They were communist.

Communist?
Well, they were atheist, completely! Both my parents came from orthodox families. They met in a communist youth group in Berlin. This meant denying a certain religious environment.

My mother had four sisters. My father had eight siblings. His father was a shoemaker, they were very poor. For a long time I was very angry, because all the siblings of my parents were able to save themselves, but not my parents. I was not able to digest this. I would have suffered less, if I had not lost my mother. She died in 1940. I know that millions of other people had not anticipated what would happen to them. Some had made up their mind to go to Palestine. My father had been there, but he did not like it, and returned to Berlin. Later I did ask my aunt, why in the world had they not immigrated. She answered me simply: "We just were not Zionist."

Your mother died in 1940?
My father was deported in September 1939. I do not know in how many concentration camps he was. I know that in 1945 when the evacuation of Auschwitz took place, he was in the death March but was able to escape. When my father was deported, my mother did everything possible to free him. She believed that through her communist connection she would succeed. But then when she saw that it was impossible, she gave up. She contracted pneumonia or something similar, but no hospital would take her in. She was finally admitted to a Jewish hospital "Moabit", but it was too late to save her. Our farewell was on the train platform. But of course I did not know this at the time.

You did not know anything about your parents at this time?
In the beginning my aunt knew of the whereabouts of my father. She wrote to the camps. I have no idea when she found out about the death of my mother. It was terrible for me that nobody told me: "Your mother is dead". They kept it a secret from me. When we lived in the south of France, publicly we spoke French, in order not to be noticed. But in the house the German language was insisted upon. So that I should not forget how to speak it with my father upon his release - since he did not speak French. It was tiresome to use both languages. It diminished my love for my father. Also, we had to speak French correctly. So as not to stand out from others, our lives depended on it. We lived in Nivelle, were the Germans undertook many raids into homes. We were suppose to be French. They did not seem to notice our terrible German accents.

You mentioned before, you were in Gurs...
Yes, we were able to escape from the camp and acquire false papers. I was four-and-a-half years old. In Nivelle, a town not far from Toulouse, we found shelter in a barn with farmers who belonged to the resistance. The barn had a rear exit, which enabled us to run out when a raid took place. The local French police would warn us in advance so that we could drive into the nearest forest.

Do you remember the nature of those raids?
Well, when they took place, unexpectedly, and we were all in the room, we remained calm, and spoke only French.

How long did you live in Nivelle?
Until 1943. During this time my aunt married a German communist who had fled with us from Paris. They had a child, and decided it was best for me to be sent to Switzerland. This was accomplished through underground connections - they stayed behind in France. Also in Nivelle I remember how I was always overcome by a feeling of loneliness. In the evening, in bed, I was hoping that my aunt would come by again to check on me. But she was too exhausted. I was so desperate and emotionally deprived, that I even remember how I beat my head against the wall. I had lost all feelings of belonging, of security.

From Nivelle, you were brought to the border?
Yes, I remember this event very well. My aunt put me on the train, then she spoke to a train conductor to deliver me in a certain place. I sat in a compartment and looked out where my aunt was standing. When the train began to move I lost my balance and hit my teeth on the windowsill, whereupon I started to cry. Not just for the pain I had, but mostly for having parted with my family. But I had to promise to be brave. We spent the night in a convent. I can not remember who accompanied me there. But I still remember clearly the sister, insisting I say my prayers before going to sleep. I can still hear her voice "You have to pray!" I had never learned to pray, and wanted for her to explain to me her warning, "You will otherwise go to hell!" I remember thinking, "What does she know about hell."

The crossing of the frontier was for me, for many years not very clear. I could not remember where and how it took place. It was told to me years later, I had to slip in an opening of the barbed-wire fence the moment the patrol was turning its back. Nobody was able to help me do this, I was on my own, and had to slip through and run. I was seven years old.

I arrived in Geneva in an internment camp. A girl whom I knew from Nivelle was already there, which made me extremely happy. From there she was brought to the same city, where my foster family also lived.

Do you remember how you arrived in this camp?
Someone came to pick me up. I suppose. In any case, I did not receive instructions, or a map that indicated where I was going.

Someone came to pick me up. I suppose. In any case, I did not receive instructions, or a map that indicated where I was going.

The soldiers at the border, were they Swiss soldiers?

Yes, crossing at the border was also a moment of total desolation and loneliness, accompanied with the words, "Run for your life!"

How long did you stay in this receiving camp?

I can not remember any more. My next memory is of the city where I was to meet my foster parents - who lived in the parish house. They had in the past another refugee child who had left them to go on to America.

Was this also a Jewish child?

Yes, it was Jewish. This parish house represents a terrible time for me. Not because of religious reasons, but rather because the family was so neurotic. They had absolutely no knowledge about the raising of children. They had no understanding of my situation. For example, I was with them on an outing, and had difficulties climbing a mountain. I was weak and undernourished; my belly was swollen. They made fun of me and said, "What is the matter with you? How come you can not keep up with us?" They had no clue about the world from which I came. The household consisted of my foster father, foster mother, their son Hans, a domestic help and me. All together; five. On the second day of my arrival - I do not know why, I said, "The vicar is the fifth wheel to the wagon," - this of course did not exactly bring me much goodwill. This family was not even very religious. They did not say any prayers at mealtime. They were against the war, and were socially engaged. I adapted quickly to the circumstances, as I always have. I called them mom and daddy, as it was offered to me. They really wanted for me to feel like I was their child, but this was not easy. Their son, who was ten years old, was also very neurotic. After my arrival, he started to wet his bed. I was told it was my fault. A few years later, he started to smoke, and threw the butts out of the window. I was told to pick them up. Worst, was the daily scene at mealtime. Hans was always late, arrived when we were already at the table. When he past me, he would hit me on my behind. The family kept quiet. Later, when he was in college, he was expelled and had to enter a reform institution. Afterwards he became an alcoholic.

One time, Janine, the girl I had met again in the camp in Geneva, came to visit me. She lived in the same city with Mrs. Bloch. Mrs. Bloch was the lady in charge of placing Jewish children in homes. We were exuberant to be together. We ran up and down the stairs, we laughed and yelled out-loud. After she left I was told, "This girl is not coming in this house again, she makes too much noise." After that visit, I never saw her again. I do not know what became of her. I did not know her second name. She was the only human, at that time, in Switzerland, to whom I felt close. After all, I had nobody else. Yes, I know she was a bit wild, and did not adjust to her surroundings, I enjoyed her, it was beautiful, but she was not allowed to come again.

Did you ask yourself sometimes, why you were not brought to a Jewish family?

would have loved to study medicine. This was of course not possible, because being an immigrant meant that I would have to pay tuition.

Was there some financial help for you, or the family who had received you?
I do not know, but I think probably not, because I often had the feeling that I was a big expense.

I went to high school then college to become a teacher, this despite the fact that I really did not care about teaching, but then became one. Much later, I went back to school, and although I did not study medicine, I was able to study psychology. I did work for two years as a teacher in a suburb. After which I decided to take a year off to travel. In England I took a job in a special home for handicapped children. While I was there I received a letter from my foster parents. They demanded that I never set foot in their house again, because I was the reason their son was ruined. They always blamed me for everything. I regret that in my rage I burned the letter.

At this time, I was engaged to be married, afterward my husband and I settled in a small town where I taught school.

When you were going to school, did you ever discuss your situation at home with anybody?
I was very happy in school. It was a place were I felt I was safe in the world, and were I felt restored - it was beautiful. There were other children, normal children, a nice school teacher and later a wonderful male teacher. I remember once I had the flu, but the second day I could barely stand up, I had a temperature. I nevertheless went to school, I didn't want to stay home. School was my savior.

Did you ever feel you were discriminated by the other children? Not accepted by them?
I had no problems with my classmates. There is one thing I have to say about my foster parents, they had the courage to tell me that my mother had died. Somehow they knew it, my aunt in France on the other-hand said nothing.

It was in May 1943, shortly after my arrival - I was in my room, which was in the attic - the reverend's wife came upstairs and said: "Your mother has died. But you still have us!" It was almost like an order not to cry. She turned around and left. I remained alone in this small attic-room. She could have embraced me...but that was taboo. I was thinking: "Up there, is my mother. She is simply some distance away." That is how I consoled myself?

After the war, did you discuss your next move?
Yes, of course, my father came to see me, and wanted for me to return with him.

When did this take place?
It was in 1947. He did not know where I was. At one time someone had told him the name of the city where I stayed, but then he had forgotten it. Then later - he told me - he

asked a friend to repeat the names of the cities in the German part of Switzerland, until he remembered again, and that is when he made contact with me.

Where did he live at this time? Had he returned to Berlin?
Yes, he went back to Berlin. Before the war he was in the furrier trade, but upon his return to Berlin he acquired a bachelor degree, and went to medical school. Somehow, in Auschwitz he worked as a nurse, and was told there that he was very talented with his hands, and was advised to become a doctor. After graduating - although he lived in the western section - he worked in East-Berlin, even after they put up the wall. He remained true to his belief.

He remained a communist?
Yes. Perhaps in the end he may have had some doubts. In any case he appeared in 1947, but I did not want any part of him. Until then I had in my memory a man tall, slender, blond with blue eyes. Nothing of what a Jewish person was supposed to look like. He was always very sure that he would not be deported. However, when he came to see me in 1947, he was a broken man who wanted to take me back to Germany. I refused. I was twelve years old, at the beginning of puberty. He did not speak about his experiences, as is customary by survivors of the concentration camps. I did not know what to expect of life in Berlin. In my mind I saw a dilapidated place with a leaky roof, and he would always be studying. What was I to do there? So I refused to join him. I even threatened to jump from the train should I be forced to go with him.

It took years before we managed to establish a good relationship. Much later, when we spoke about this period, I learned that he was then already a doctor. He told me that if he had known about my concerns he would have married his girl-friend sooner, in order to offer me a stable homelife.

And that is how I remained with this terrible family. It was something I was familiar with, and had become use to.

Afterwards, did your father try again, for you to join him?
No, my reaction against him was too resolute. However, he came every year with his new wife to Switzerland to see me. Much to her credit, we were eventually able to have an understanding for each other, and many years later we could even talk about the concentration camps. This was no easy task on her part, and for me as well. Later, my father and I could talk for hours, until late in the night. When we first met, he was a stranger to me and the fact that I rejected him, was a blow to him. He told me that during his stay in Auschwitz he kept a photo of me - no matter the difficulties - as sometimes they were forced to parade in the nude. He told me that I was the child he had to find after the Holocaust.

At the end of the war, when they were on the dead march out of Auschwitz, he presented it as a gift to the women who saved them - who took them in. They found food and work at her uncle's farm, where they were able to wait for the end of the war.

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I also believe that this photograph of me gave him strength to survive the war, it might sound a bit presumptuous, but I think it gave him strength to not give up.

...A duty to find his child.
...Yes, he had to find this child. It was a photo my aunt had sent him in the beginning of the war, apparently she knew where he was.

So, after 1947 you saw him every year?
Yes, yes. He came every year somewhere in Switzerland on vacation, and came to see me. In 1958 I became engaged, and he was eager to meet his son-in-law. I remember, at the time, we were also on vacation in a small town called Feldis. One day, I went shopping in the only store in town, when suddenly, he was standing in back of me. I remember he startled me - I was like in shock! That was how poorly our communication was at the time. We had a strange relationship. Of course it was insane for me not to return with my father, considering that I felt very unhappy in the vicar's house. But somehow I was in need of some security. Also, my father was not very talkative. In the meanwhile, I learned that this was how survivors at the camps were. Understandably...

The manner in which you described your situation, sounds as if you regret your decision not to have gone with your father?
Yes, possibly.

Have you talked about it with friends?
I avoided the subject. The fact that my father came to take me with him; I'm sure I did not discuss it with anyone.

You were twelve years old, and you still attended school many years after that. Do you believe that your feelings were not understood at the time, because you adjusted so quickly, and so well in school?
Yes. For many years I was in denial of my feelings. On the surface I functioned all right, but emotionally --- School was beautiful, it was a change. Yet, when we took a trip at the end of the school year, I had a hard time staying in control. I remember even liking the teacher. I nearly drowned. We were swimming in a stream, and I slipped on a pebble and had to be rescued. The students made a chain - the bank was steep - the strongest one was holding on to a tree, with the others reaching to get me out of the water. It must have been some suicidal act on my part, because the stream was really not deep.

Many years later I felt the need to talk to this teacher and went to see him. He told me that he was a bit puzzled at the time, and could not quite understand the situation. After I told him about the circumstances of my life; he reacted somewhat shocked: "But why did you not come to me then, to talk with me. Perhaps we could have remedied the situation."

Perhaps it would have been possible to talk to my foster parents. However, looking back, I just was not able to tell anybody, how terrible I really felt.

Did your husband know your story?
Yes, yes. We met in a socialist organization. A "make love not war" group. It was my first experience outside of the Vicar's house. Also, for my husband, it was an experience that enabled him to flee his environment. His father, when still a child, had immigrated with his communist family from Italy. Later, marrying his mother who was the daughter of a Noble Prize winner. However, he was always sick, and they were very poor. Being a communist, his father was unable to become a Swiss citizen. So, my husband had a difficult background but in a different way.

How many children do you have?
Three; the first one was born in Israel, the second in New York and the third one in Zurich. We wanted to get married;, have children, and also see the world. We lived three years in New York, and nine months in Israel.

I saw my father the last time in Israel when I flew there for his funeral. He's buried in Cholon.

When was this?
1981. He went there with his wife and son, from his second marriage, to visit the whole family. They had plans to stay for two week. He went swimming in the ocean - he always enjoyed swimming - and drowned. I had once told his wife, 'If something happens, let me know". I did not want to be left in the dark, as I was when my mother died. So I did fly to be there.

He was to be buried according to the old Jewish tradition, and they were waiting for me to arrive. There was a very big crowd, and when I asked who they were, I was told they were all cousins. I counted 147, some were a bit more removed. All had left Europe in time, expect my parents. I have very little contact with them.

But your father apparently, somehow, kept in contact with them?
Yes. Although he often complained and said "Oh no," they were all so religious. It is difficult to have a conversation with them, and they have no interest in politics at all.

What was your reaction when you went to Israel the first time, and met your family?
They were in shock when they saw me. First, I did not know why. Then I realized I had provoked them with the cross I was wearing around my neck. At that time I was Protestant, and had this ideal of Albert Schweitzer. I have since left the church.

My father often repeated stories from his concentration camp experience. The following is one such story:

An SS man tried to drown him in a wash basin. He kept pushing my father's head repeatedly under water. My father lapsed into unconsciousness after a friend approached, and said to the SS man, "Why don't you go now, and I will finish him off." When the SS left the room he brought my father back to life and helped him get well. After all of that he ended up drowning in the ocean in Israel.

You were with your husband nine months in Israel. Did you plan to stay there?

Well, yes and no. We were considering joining a Kibbutz; I felt we would be joining a community, and not be alone. One of my cousins made this possible, she lived in Kibbutz Machanaim", and they really did receive us. However, I was pregnant at the time and could not be very productive, and therefore was not able to integrate well. After nine months we left.

Did you consider Switzerland to be your home?
Yes. In 1957 I became a citizen. Also, because in order to become a teacher, one had to be Swiss. Before this point I was stateless, without any roots.
Did you question your identity as a Jewish person? Did you ever consider being a Jew?
I have denied this identity. I did not want to have anything to do with it. It was a burden, something I could not manage.
However, today things are different. Since the mid-eighties I have had the desire to acquire more knowledge. I have made friends with a women whose husband was a Rabbi. She introduced me to Jewish services, and I have enjoyed them, and found them to be very uplifting.
Did the recent discussions about the role of Switzerland during the second world war have any personal impact?
Yes. I asked myself, 'what is really new about those revelations?' Everybody knew about the situation, one only had to read the newspapers. I am scared by the resurfacing of the anti-Semitic atmosphere. It appears in letters to the editors in open, blatant forms. The expressions of anti-Semitic viewers is once-again accepted, in order to take part in the debates. Yes, it frightens me when I read sentences like, "We had to struggle to have enough to eat ourselves." It makes me sick what some people think they know of hunger.
Among your acquaintances, are your views shared, or are you...
A few years ago, I read a book "Children With the Yellow Star"1, it made me relive the terrible misery. I read the book while I was on vacation with my boyfriend, I was divorced by that time, he kept asking me why I had to read such stuff. I answered, "I must, I must!" Afterwards, he picked up the book, started to read it and never put it down. He subsequently had more understanding for me.
We know generally about the war. Yet, it seems people still do not have a clue about what really took place. How to understand what took place?

1. Deborah Dwork, "Children With the Yellow Star"
Europe 1933 - 1945 (Munich 1994)

I think, even we have a little hope to make things better, yet one still has to try to do something.

I think, even we have a little hope to make things better, yet one still has to try to do something.

Yes. I have often asked myself, if I belonged to the first or second generation, since I was a "child survivor". After all I was born in pre-war Berlin, but lived in France then in Switzerland, and I can not be compared to those who survived the concentration camps. Slowly I've come to understand why survivors do not talk about their experiences. Simply because it is incomprehensible for those who have not lived through it.

Later, my father and I talked for hours, sometimes until late in the night. His wife used to call out "stop it now, he will not be able to sleep afterwards". Today I think it was good for me to know more, but whether I can truly understand, I doubt it. I have heard much, and have suffered much with him. But I ask myself how can one explain such a tragedy, such madness.

What I did transmit, is the experience of a terrible loneliness that engulfed me since the age of three and a half. I was overly concerned to give my children a feeling of security and warmth, without, perhaps, succeeding. Something other mothers were in a better position to give their children. I've been blamed for this. It is difficult for the second generation to have understanding for a person like myself. It is not an excuse, but my children suffered because of my shortcomings. I could not give them what I did not have, and that is perhaps the whole tragedy.

Interviewed by: Raphael Gross

6
The World must know.

Interview with Fischl Rabinowicz

Fischl Rabinowicz picked me up at the train station in Locarno. He was well prepared for our conversations. We walked across this sunny city to his apartment. Mister Rabinowicz is an artist. His thoughts are defined less by his speech than by his paintings, which are full of cabalistic signs, a medieval Jewish mysticism of interpreting the scriptures. Putting meaning in the order of Hebrew letters. His artistic creations show how the Jews from Sosnowiec were exploited, put in ghettos and murdered in a city not far from Auschwitz.

I was born in 1924 in Poland, in Sosnowiec, an industrial city with coal mines and steelworks. It is located in upper Schlesian about eight kilometers from Katowice. In 1939 Sosnowiec was a city with a population of 127,000, of which about 28,000 were Jewish and in which all religious and political parties were represented. There were the Orthodox, the very pious, that is to say the Chassidim, then the Misrachi, less pious, all the way to the communist, and also the Bund [Jewish socialist group]. We belonged to the Misrachi, pious from the inside, but outwardly we looked like everybody else. In the morning we went to public school, in the afternoon we attended Cheder. This until our Bar Mizva. In Cheder, and also at home we spoke Yiddish, in school we spoke Polish except with good friends. I went to school seven years, and spent one year in business school, until the war broke out. Jews in Poland, had with the rest of the population, something of an unwritten contract. We did not live together. We lived next to each other.

I personally had contact with Christians, mostly for commercial reasons. We were the owners of a small business. We sold bed linens and tablecloths, and I used to help out. There were ten children in my family. I was the third son. My two elder brothers and I were members in a Zionist organization.

In September 1939 everything changed. But, since 1937 anti-Semitism had made inroads, and we started to experience it actively. For instance our stores were boycotted, they were standing with signs that read Do not buy from Jews . In Parliament debates took place about restricting the civil rights of Jews. The reality was that in most of Poland, Jews had acquired a certain autonomy. For instance, school was public, but eventually only Jewish students attended certain schools. Also most of the teachers and administration were Jewish. On Saturdays and holidays there was no instruction.

Did you have non-Jewish friends?
Very few. We lived in a house that was around a courtyard where sixteen Jewish families lived. We lived separated from the general population on a voluntary basis. This, to be near a synagogue, or because of the celebration of the Sabbath. In general because of our common culture. It was rare that a Christian family wanted to move into such a housing situation. In the country-side things were different. In Poland, most Jews lived in cities.

Did your siblings all belong to the Misrachi or the other Zionist organizations?
I had one brother who was younger. He played the violin very well, he was extremely talented. He succumbed in the camp. No, the others were much too small to belong to organizations. I am a descendant of a family who five generations back had a member who was the founder of an important Chassichic movement. Salomon Raninowicz (1803-1866) was called the Radomsker Rabbi. He had many followers. He was also the author of important works, including *The Magnificence of Salomon*. Those books are still considered as the classics of the Chassidim today. The title was inherited from father to son. The Jewish council employed my grandfather, whose name was also Salomon Rabinowicz. He was in charge of overseeing the killing of animals according to ritual laws as well as the inspection of the slaughter house. Our family also descends from the Cohen tribe, which has certain obligations and limitations, according to certain religious beliefs.

From our father s family, three brothers and one cousin remained alive, thirty-one people were killed. This does not include the destruction of the people on mother s side. In Lithuania and Latvia whole communities were annihilated. Also in small hamlets in Poland everyone was deported and killed. Numbers are always important.

How can one understand this?
I work a lot with numbers. My paintings are based upon numbers. A number exists for a reason. In life there has to be order. Numbers explain things. I am mostly preoccupied with Jewish culture and history and cabalistic interpretations of numbers. It is a knowledge, which has nowadays nearly disappeared. Only very few Jews are still preoccupied with it.

You were fifteen years old when the Germans invaded Poland?
Yes, the war started Friday morning, the first of September 1939. At this time 3,420,000 Jews lived in Poland. Sunday the 3rd of September we saw the retreat of the Polish army. On Monday the 4th, the Germans occupied the city. They took several hundred Jews as hostages. Thirteen were immediately shot. Bloodshed, plunder and destruction accompanied the entry. Behind the German army there were the so-called Poles of German descent. They broke the windows of Jewish businesses, and started to loot. They took what they wanted and were able to carry. They knew exactly where everything was. Monday the terror started. Religious Jews had their beard and sidelocks cut off. They destroyed the synagogues and set them on fire. In one city, not far from Sosnowiec, in Bendzyn, they set fire to the synagogues and 56 adjoining houses. Almost a hundred people were burned alive. Businesses, workshops and factories were confiscated and just taken away. On November 1, 1939 it became obligatory to wear the Jewish star. The main thoroughfares of the city were closed off to Jews. A ghetto without walls was immediately created. It was the beginning of the raids, the deportations and the work camps.

On May 10, 1942, 1,500 people were deported to Auschwitz; in June, 2,000; in August, 8,000. The rest of the population was moved to the Ghetto Srodula on the outskirts of the city. On March 10, 1943, the gates of the ghetto were closed. We were locked inside.

Our family owned a small factory, but we had no wealth. There were ten of us. The first five or six months we were still able to sell some of our possessions. Then my father, who had no formal education had nevertheless a general knowledge of chemistry, invented a way of making soap without using heat. There was a large demand for soap and we were able to survive. The production of soap was forbidden because it needed German butter and margarine. Despite all the possible precautions, we were eventually denounced and reported.

By whom?
By neighbors.

By Jewish neighbors?
Yes, that also happened. Twice the Germans had searched our house and did not find anything. For security reasons my brother and I worked in different places. Our clients were miners, a connection my father had established. That is how we received our income in 1940 and 1941. Then, we had difficulties acquiring the necessary raw materials, as the ghetto became more strictly guarded. My father switched to become sort of a jeweler, making gold bracelets. My father s brother-in-law was a goldsmith whom he had often watched work. He also was very handy. My younger brother Jacob, Jankele , was born in 1930 and was in charge of deliveries. It had become very dangerous on the streets.

I did not live with them through this period, as I was the first one deported. My brothers later told me about the making of gold bracelets. One brother lives in Israel and was deported in 1942. The other lives in Australia today. As I said I was the first one deported to the camp, on May 26, 1941. That is when I became a slave in Germany.

Were you arrested in the street?
Yes, I was sixteen and a half and was arrested along with my younger brother Heskiel. He was tall and slender whereas I was stocky and wider. We were told to do some exercises. My brother was declared unfit and was sent back home. He died later, in 1943, in Camp Faulbruck.

Did your parents have an opportunity to bid you farewell?
Through the fence I saw my mother. My father and siblings were afraid to appear. Later I met my older brother Schaja in a camp that built the freeways. We were the Jewish slaves who built the highways going to Leipzig — Dresden —Breslau —Katowice.

Who were the overseers?
First we were guarded by the SA, older German police, and later by the SS. From May 26, 1941 until the beginning of April 1942 I worked on the highways in Gunthersdorf, Rogau, Annaberg, Brande, Gross Masselwitz, and Bunslau.

In the concentration camp in Kittlitzstreben I received the number 19037.

Did you talk to German civilian workers?
No, it was forbidden and I do not think they were interested in doing so. In any case we were afraid. In the beginning we were treated like slaves; then, like animals. We were

called blockheads , cows . Then, we were just a numbers. The camp had a fence though it would have been possible to flee from work, but to where? There were cases where the inhabitants would return those who had escaped. In the beginning, there was this possibility later, there were beatings, shot on the spot, or deportation to Auschwitz.

Were you one of the youngest?
Yes, also one of the smallest. At this time my hair was fire-red. The Germans called me redhead, somehow they cared for me. Yes, it was my luck to be assigned the easiest work during my four years in the camps. I did not have to load the trucks, that was real slave work, it killed you. I just had to clean the trucks, lubricate and check them.

In Gleiwitz there were workers from all over Europe. This included people who had enlisted to work for the Germans for pay. From France, Bulgaria, Italy, and so on. With them we exchanged news, and received newspapers. We all knew what was going on.

In Gleiwitz I helped manufacture bullets. It was dangerous work, but as long as they fed you, it was tolerable. In the beginning we received two meals daily; later, only one in the evening. We carried our canteen with us, and on the way to our barracks we stopped at the kitchen. There they gave us a pint of soup. Sometimes there was a sliver of meat in it, or half of a potato. By the time we reached the barracks it was gone. After we had washed up, they came around and handed us a piece of black bread. In the morning we received a dark liquid, they called it coffee.

We were always hungry, and people stole rations of food from each other. Man was slowly becoming like an animal. There was no solidarity left.

I will describe to you a case I witnessed. In our barrack were two friends who had gone to school together, who had lived in the same house. One of them was put in the infirmary, he was ill. The other was put in charge of bringing him his soup. I noticed how he took a sip out of the bowl, then another. By the time he got to his friend, the bowl was empty. On the third day, he was told, your friend is dead . I am not saying he died because he did not receive those bowls of soup, I am just telling you how terrible it was.

This is not to say that there were no cases of solidarity. They did exist. But by and large, men had become worse than animals. It was official policy to degrade us to slaves, to numbers and then to animals. But even wild animals do not devour each other.

Shall we take a brake?
Yes. (He shows us paintings he calls my biography .)

When we meet again Fischl Rabinowicz explains his paintings. Hebrew letters are falling and he explains the position of the letters and the meaning of them according to cabalistic interpretations he has studied. [For this translator, his metaphysical explanations were difficult to understand.]

On March 7, 1944 I arrived in Kittlitzstreben, the last camp. It was especially harsh. The kapos [guards], chosen from among the prisoners, were all Germans. They were mostly German criminals, whereas before, at the other camps, there were Jewish kapos or sometimes elders were in charge. The SS was in charge of the camp.

I was part of a group of thirty prisoners. We were called a commando . It was our job to lay the rails for the railroads. I was in charge of screwing the ties to the rails. But, of course, first the soil had to be made solid. Bringing stones from a quarry and hammering them under the rails. This was work no one among us could do more than two months, perhaps ten weeks. It was like a death sentence. Being undernourished, exhausted, and under the watchful eyes of the guards — nobody could last longer. One of the guards, a German civilian, was an expert in beatings with a crowbar, while the SS stood by. Of the thirty people who began working on April 7, 1944 only two survived until the job was finished in October. I remained alive, because I had only to turn a screwdriver and keep the tools clean.

I remember camp Bunzlau. There, we also worked on the railroads. Among us was a young man, an intellectual type, and a son of a Jewish-Polish attorney. He was perhaps one year older than I. His name was Jerzyk. I guess it would be George in English. He could not sleep. He sat upright in his bunk bed and told stories, or recited poems, whatever went through his mind. One evening he was talking without stop, in Polish not Yiddish. He came from an assimilated family, and he said, One should put the whole place ablaze, because for us there is no more hope . The barrack elder told him to be quiet, that he wanted to sleep. We on the other hand took it in stride, he foresaw what was going to happen. We were living like animals, only concerned about survival, day after day. A very small bit of hope remained with some of us I think. Desperation would otherwise have been too much to bear. After a while George became calmer, and we fell asleep. The next morning we learned that he had run into the barbed wire fence and been electrocuted.

On February 5, 1945 the camp was evacuated. The sick and weak were left behind. We could hear the canons from the Soviet troops, they were not far off. At half past five in the morning there was the roll call. Forty-five minutes later we marched away from the camp. I would like to give you the exact numbers, which I wrote down fifty years ago. In the camp there were about 1900 prisoners, of which 1220 were selected for the march. The same day, in the evening the Russians liberated 700 inmates whom the Germans did not have time to liquidate.

For those on the march, it was very terrible. Those who were not able to continue were shot on the spot. In the beginning we were each given about two pounds of bread, that would last us four days. I was walking with a friend, Monek Markowitz, I noticed that he could not keep up and for me he became a hindrance. I told him, Monek, you have to keep walking, we have to keep up with the others. He said, I can not anymore. An SS man came and said in a friendly tone, Those who cannot continue, just sit on the side of the road, a truck will pick you up. I did not like the friendliness of the SS man. I said to Monek, I can not remain with you, I have to join the others. That was the end. A half hour later shots rang out, about thirty-seven were shot on this second evening.

Monek had a brother, David Markowicz, who was also in the march. He was ahead in the column, with some friends. In the evening we stopped to spend the night in a grange, the town was deserted, the inhabitants had fled before the Russians arrived. Monek was told that his brother had been shot. He did not survive the night because he had received the order from his father to look after his younger brother, and he had failed. He died not of exhaustion, but how should I say, he had not been able to keep a promise.

We were on the road for fifty-five days, with very little food, covered with rags and lice. Those marches are known as death marches. We arrived in Buchenwald with only 746 of us. At the beginning there were 1220 people, and arrived with 746, that is a difference of 476 prisoners who were shot or had starved to death.

I was liberated April 11, 1945. Two hours after the liberation I was put in a military hospital. I was too exhausted to be happy, perhaps I even cried.

Before the liberation I spend seven days in Buchenwald. During this time I was lying on the concrete floor of some workshop. We received almost nothing to eat. There were perhaps a thousand of us, and everyday twenty or perhaps thirty corpses were taken outside. They were stacked in a pile, four in each direction. Piles of corpses. In the morning, sanitary workers came to pick them up. The shoes were left behind, that was how they were able to count the dead. This went on for seven days, then I had to change barracks. I was hardly able to move. It is then, two days before the liberation of Buchenwald, all the inmates were chased together to continue the death march, in which everybody was shot. I was supposed to be among them, but then when I realized that I could hardly stand up, I went outside and lay down and acted as if I were dead. There was a lot of commotion, the survivors were rounded up. Then sadly, it was very quiet. I do not know exactly how long I was lying in this state. Two sanitary workers passed near me and I heard one say, Wait, let me see if this one is still alive. He felt my pulse and said, Yes, he is still alive, lets bring him to the main camp. I was lying there until the next day, the day of liberation. Shortly thereafter the soup was distributed. It was hot soup, with some fat on top, with peas, potatoes and some pieces of meat. It was heavenly soup, a dream. I gulped it down, I was offered a second helping, which I was about to consume, when I suddenly had to go to the bathroom. I was not able to hold myself back, and shit was all over me. I tried to clean myself without success. I took my pajama clothing off, and the others were yelling, Out with you, you stink. I went outside and stretched myself out on the ground. It was a beautiful warm day in the spring.

I must have been lying there a few hours, it was evening when again two sanitation workers came by and put me on a stretcher. They brought me in the hospital. I was washed, sprayed with DDT, and all hair was removed. American soldiers took care of. Me. We were given food eight times during the day, but only a few spoons full at a time. We could drink as much as we wanted and after ten days I was moved to an intensive care unit and received daily infusions. About two weeks after liberation I weighed 63 pounds, and I was 21 years old.

I spent 1410 days in camps, and then 1480 days in hospitals and sanctuaries. If I add the 633 days from the first of September 1939 until I arrive in the camp it makes a total of 3523 days. I other words, almost ten years of my life was taken from me.

When you were liberated what did you know about the fate of your family?
As I told before, on my father s side 31 people were murdered. My father, Joseph Rabinowicz, was born in 1899 and was shot on March 27, 1945 in the Flossenburg concentration camp. My mother, Sara Rabinowicz, was born in 1901 and was deported along with six of my other siblings on August 1943 to Auschwitz. My sister Chaja, born 1927, my brother Jacob, was born 1930, and Benjamin was born in 1933. My sister, Frimka, born 1935, Manja born 1937 and Berecha, born 1940 were deported on June 19,

1943. I have never heard from any of them. My brother Heskiel was born in 1925 and died in Camp Faulbruck. My two older brothers and I survived.

The first two years following liberation I spent in German hospitals in Blankenhain. Then I traveled past Berlin to another German sanatorium, Gauting in Bavaria. Many Jews were there and I preferred it to a sanatorium in occupied Germany. In 1947 I came to Davos in Switzerland, where I remained until the end of April 1949.

Who supported you?
It was the Joint , a Jewish-American philanthropic organization. It did not cost Switzerland one penny. Part of the cost I repaid to them, after I had received a lump sum as reparation from the Germans.

Would you like to immigrate to Israel?
No, although I believe in Zionism, it somehow did not seem reasonable for me. There was a time in my life when it almost happened. I was on a trip to learn to become a window-dresser. I stopped in Zurich to visit the school of arts and crafts. When I was at the train station, a woman asked me if I was Jewish and then asked if I would please escort a young Jewish girl on the train. She was on her way to Italy where she would embark for Israel. I had to get off beforehand. But then I started to worry about the young woman and I wanted to make sure she arrived safely in Venice where she would go on board. I arranged my papers and left for Venice. When I arrived at the harbor I saw that the ship was almost ready to depart. I started to call the young woman s name until she finally appeared half asleep on deck. Then someone said, I am removing the cord. Do you want to come on board? And others started to yell, come on board, come. It was an opportunity, but I was thinking, I cannot just run away, without papers, in the middle of my apprenticeship. My doctor also would not have approved because of the humid and hot climate in Israel. So I remained. If I had gone my life would have developed very differently.

In Switzerland I had continuous difficulties in renewing my visa every three months. Finally they told me to leave the country for a while, that I had been here long enough. I spent a year in France from where I tried to immigrate to Canada. But I was not successful. I returned to Switzerland in the train when a very friendly official said, Well, do not worry. I will see to it that you have a six month residence. I looked for, and found, a job as a decorator in Chiasso. Through my work, I obtained a temporary residence permit. I moved to Locarno where I met my future wife. In Locarno I was finally was treated like a human being. The Province [Canton] of Tessin was generous. They automatically gave me a residency permit for one year. In 1964, I became, thank God, a Swiss citizen.

Have you had conversations with Swiss people to whom you have shared your experiences?
Well, I was invited to speak in schools, to 15 and 16 year old young people. I told them of my experiences between 1939 and 1945. The last time it took longer than in the past. With the present debate about reparations and so on the young people have taken more interest. They want to know as much as possible. Up until now, even my acquaintances showed little interest about what happened. Until 1995 they felt the war happened fifty

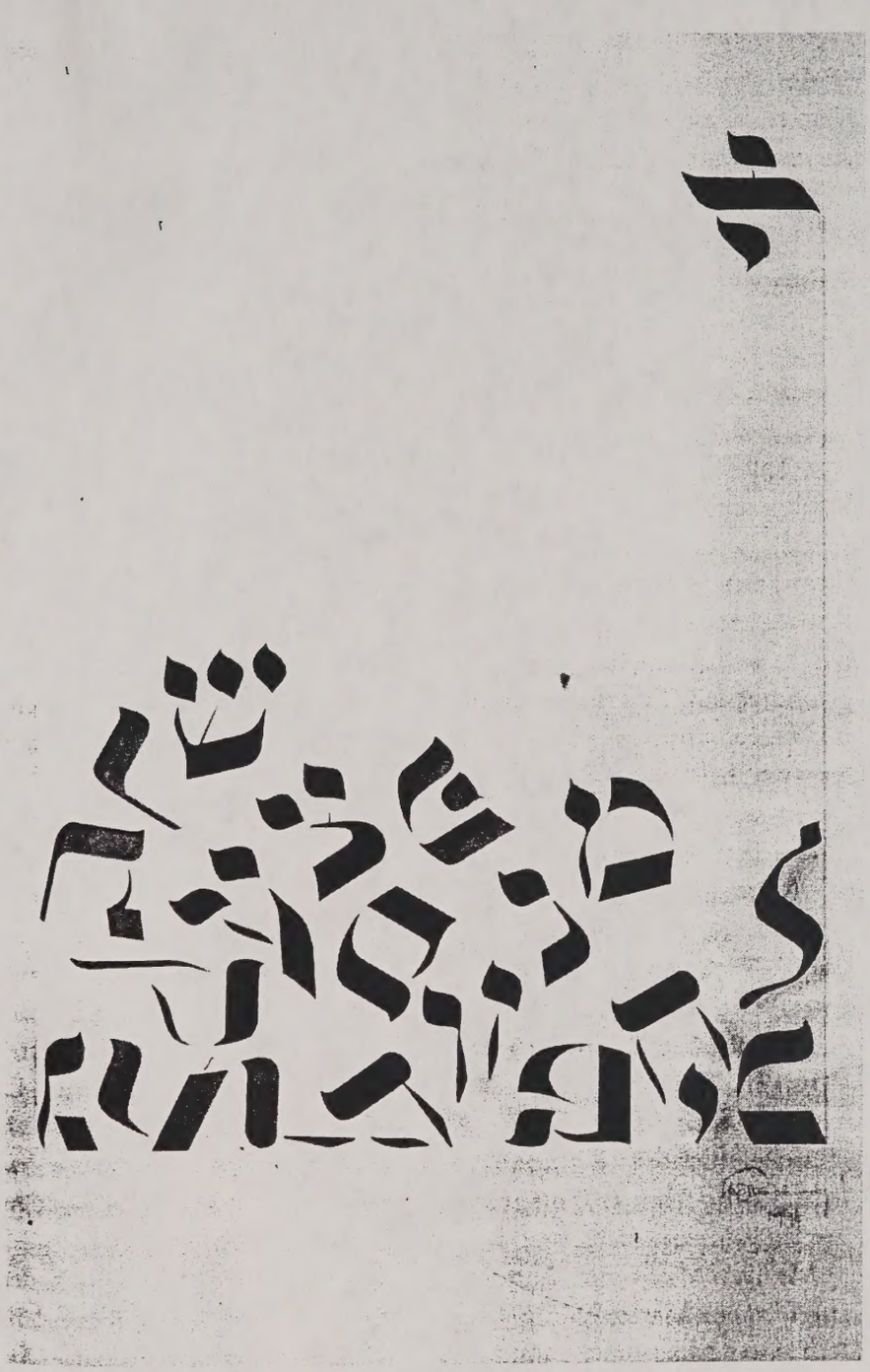
years ago. I did not even tell my own son of my experiences. I felt he needed a certain maturity. I did not want to burden him. But of course he knew, after all we live together. I feel it will take time for him to understand. I believe that everything has to grow slowly. When I spend sleepless nights I have to ponder and think and make a lot of effort not to despair, to loose faith in God, and in people. I spent many years in camps and since 1943 in a concentration camp. There are two reasons why I made those paintings. About ten years ago, before retiring, I felt the need to tell about what happened. I could have told my experiences with words. Words do convey meaning. But I decided to paint. I was not interested in showing people behind barbed-wire, others had done this. I chose to interpret events with cabalistic symbols. I began to study Jewish history, and also the writings in the Talmud, which describe the Jewish traditions through the ages. When I finally retired, I knew the kind of compositions I wanted to represent. I thought about it many nights, sometimes for two months. And then, in the daytime, I started to paint it.

I felt I had to leave some traces, some signs, to posterity about the events which preoccupied me — to try to find an explanation to why it all happened. I wanted to remind future generations what the Jewish culture had been. I had to, otherwise, there will be no memory, no monument of what was.

I am not very religious, as a matter of fact, I am filled with many doubts. Somehow I celebrate the holidays. The second reason for my paintings is that it connects me with my past, my roots. Yes, it is a form of therapy, I think it is important, as we cannot run away from it.

This painting on top shows the Hebrew letter *Alex*, which represents us all. I am in it also. I call it a therapy in which our suffering unites us. Perhaps future generations will be able to interpret things better, because in many ways it is incomprehensible what happened. It takes a transcendental philosophy that asserts a fundamental irrationality in experiences and that knowledge of reality is mystical. It should be written down, for future generations — the world must know . Perhaps things will improve. But I am a pessimist. But it is our duty to record history. The world must know.

Interview by Raphael Gross



Fischl Rabinowicz, The Survivor in Locarno, 1994.